



Complexities of Instructional Support

Contributed By [Kim Davis](#)

Some students with an autism spectrum disorder have better success in school when he or she receives individual support. This support usually comes from a paraeducator, also known as a teaching assistant. Over the years the use of paraeducators has changed from someone who did clerical or housekeeping tasks to someone who is actively engaged in the learning process. Their active participation is an important piece of the special education process, especially with the growing numbers of students with an autism spectrum disorder who may require more individualized support. It is clear that the one on one attention can be crucial and that paraeducators guidance can be an invaluable asset.

Can there be a downside to a student receiving one on one support? How could it hurt the student's learning or impede gaining independent skills if there is a person constantly with a student with an autism spectrum disorder? If the paraeducator is not utilized properly or if their role is not fully explained and understood, the relationship between the student and the paraeducator may impede future goals, especially the goals that will facilitate future success of the individual when he becomes an adult. Too much support may not be as wonderful as it sounds.

While paraeducators can provide support in many situations, it is crucial for every student's team to look at the bigger picture including looking into the future to consider what the best support system will be. Future supports may look very different, especially once the individual is out of school, where there are no paraeducators readily available. If that is the case, what should the educational support team, which includes parents, teachers, paraeducators, therapists, administrators and others, consider during the academic years that will enable the individual with ASD to become as independent as possible in adult life?

When is a paraeducator necessary? One component of a decision making model created by Murphy and Mueller (2001) consists of a student ability and assistance needs matrix. This focuses on what the student can or cannot do and the extent of assistance he or she needs. The plan looks at the entire day and asks paraeducator to consider the following about each activity:

- What the student can do without assistance;
- What student cannot do and needs an accommodation to complete;
- What the student cannot do and needs assistance with;
- Identify areas to promote social acceptance and how peers will be utilized; and
- Identify areas you will target for independence (identified in IEP).

Ultimately, the job of anyone who supports a person with autism (or any disability) is to help that person achieve as much independence as possible. For some that may be minimal due to how much support they need, but for many others, there is the potential for many independent activities including making friends, getting a job, and succeeding in school.

In her book, *How to be a Para Pro* (2000), Diane Twachtman-Cullen aptly describes the roles and responsibilities of a paraprofessional and also created the 10 Commandments of Paraprofessional Support; numbers 5 and 6 are particularly noteworthy.

5. Thou shalt master the art of rendering the appropriate degree of support for your student's level of skill development and behavior.

6. Thou shalt exercise vigilance in fading back prompts and promoting competence and independence in your student (p. 176).

Ultimately both of these commandments are stressing the need to support the student to become more independent, more connected with natural supports (classmates and peers in school), and less dependent on one adult who ministers to the student's every need. Truly there are students who are needier than others, but even those students can be inspired and encouraged to learn how to be as independent as possible. For example, students who may have to take medication can be taught to go to the office to take their medicine by building a routine around the process.

Why are these commandments noteworthy? They provide the cautions that are necessary to ensure that the student receives the best and most appropriate support. If the commandments are not followed, there are many pitfalls that can happen for the student and the paraeducator. They are:

- The student can become a one on one junkie;
- The student learning to push buttons that can upset the paraeducator;
- There can be burn out for both the student and paraeducator;
- They may become stagnant and dull in their interactions and learning;
- They can develop a dependence on one another; and
- They can deter peer interaction and friendships from blossoming.

Each pitfall deserves discussion to point why care must be taken not to be too supportive of any child.

One on one junkie

A "one on one junkie" is the student who will only work if there is one particular person working with him or her. While there are students who need intensive support in order to achieve, it is not wise to have the same support person or paraeducator assigned to that student for the duration of the year. This can cause trouble for both the paraeducator and the student and, ultimately, does not help the student. If the student is dependent on one adult and that adult is absent, it can create a dismal day for the student and anyone else around him or her. The real world is made up of many individuals who support one another, a student with autism needs to interact with many including educators, therapists, doctors, or other professionals. There will always be someone new and therefore, it is wise to begin the process of becoming used to various people while the child is young and in school.

The student learns to push buttons that can upset the paraeducator

Every one of us has certain things that irritate us in some way. For some people students who constantly ask the same question repeatedly can be very annoying. For another it may be the student who starts to run away but then looks to make sure you are chasing him or her that is distressing. Whatever your "button" might be, students are quick to pick it up and may begin to push that button on a daily basis. This is more likely to occur the longer one person works with one student only. Not only that, but the paraeducator may unknowingly be doing things that upset the student. For instance, a paraeducator may not know how long to wait for responses and think the student is being willfully disobedient, when in fact, the student needs more time to process. If this relationship were to continue, it could cause major behavior challenges.

There can be burn out for both the student and paraeducator and they may become stagnant and dull in their interactions and learning

Anytime people spend a great deal of time together dealing with challenges and hard times there can be burn out. The paraeducator may begin to lose interest in the student and feel overwhelmed, not know what to do, and begin to give up and not be as effective as possible. A student with a paraeducator who has given up is not in a good situation, nor is a child who is with someone who does not understand how his autism manifests. Some students may find that they are faced with a lack of understanding daily. They too may initially fight to get their point across or may ultimately give up as well.

They can develop a dependence on one another which can create a sense of being "needed"

Everyone likes to feel "needed" in some way. We all enjoy lending a hand to a friend; "being there" for someone is a terrific feeling. Sometimes this feeling of being important and necessary can be a detriment especially in the case of a paraeducator who begins to feel that he or she is the only one who can get a student to work or pay attention, or even bring happiness to the student. That is not healthy nor is it reality. Creating a dependence on one person can ultimately lead to failure and frustration for the student, the student's family and for the rest of the educational staff. Just because someone feels needed or becomes attached to one child it is not the best reason to maintain him or her as a paraeducator for only one child.

They can deter peer interaction and friendships from blossoming

One specific area in which paraeducators should facilitate independence is in enhancing the students' social goals. For many students with autism who do not speak or have minimal verbal skills, the assistance of a paraeducator can be crucial. However there is little evidence, according to Mueller and Murphy, of paras being involved in enhancing students' social goals. They state that "most see success in academics and the social connectedness aspect is not enhanced including connecting with peers. " This does little to improve the ability to be more independent in future settings. While academic success can help people achieve some degree of success, it is the ability to interrelate that facilitates true success now and into the future. Everyone must be able to get along, speak or interact with others and have a circle of friends to further achieve success. "Peer interaction is a critical component of the function of a paraeducator (Mueller and Murphy, 2001)."

The task of a paraeducator is challenging, they need support and innovative ways to help them stay fresh; and how to support their students. In order to facilitate novel interactions between paraeducators and students, some schools have used a system in which paraprofessionals switch children every two hours or even less. They may go to different classes with students who are included or simply work with another child in a segregated classroom. The idea is to avoid having one paraeducator with one student for the entire day. Reports from paraeducators and students who experience this say it is working. They are provided breaks from people who might be having a bad day, they look forward to new approaches, and can maintain a better sense of being a "teacher and student" instead of creating an unusual sort of dependant relationship.

Truly paraeducators can do a great deal of good, but they can also create negative experiences. Paraeducators may say they want what is best for the student and often don't realize that not being around all of the time is the best thing to do. They need to help the student be ready for the world, help them learn as much as possible while fostering independence, and how to build relationships with peers.

Simply put, the job of paraeducators is three fold:

- To support the student to do the work. Paras should not do the work.
- To facilitate interactions with other adults and more importantly, with peers. Getting along with others is a crucial life skill.
- To understand accommodations and adaptations that would help each student lifelong.

The relationship between a paraeducator and a student needs to be clear and clean. There can be no question about who is in charge and who knows what to do in each and every situation. Students with autism need someone who is clear, consistent and knows when to draw the line; being a friend is not the best solution. Instead, they need an adult who helps them learn how to interact with others and progress in school to help build a stronger foundation upon which their future depends.

References

Mueller, P.H. & Murphy, F.V. (2001). Determining when a student requires para educator support. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(6), 22-27.

Twachtman-Cullen, D. (2000). How to be a para pro: A comprehensive training manual for paraprofessionals. Higganum, CT: Starfish Specialty Press.

Davis, K. (2007). Complexities of instructional support. *The Reporter* 12(1), 1-3.